



SENATOR

**Phil Rockefeller**

E-Newsletter - 23rd District, Bainbridge Island

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**23rd Legislative District**

**March 18, 2010**

Dear Neighbors,

We are now four days into the special session which the Legislature intends to make short and focused. There is considerable momentum built toward ultimate agreements on filling the \$2.8 billion budget deficit, but a few more days are needed to get it done right. After all, we're dealing with the impacts of the most severe recession since the Great Depression and the largest revenue decline in state history, compared to projected revenue. As a member of the Ways & Means Committee, I am working on budget reconciliation between House and Senate spending cuts for all of our state's natural resources and environmental protection agencies.

In addition, I am working on other issues important to our district and our state. These include ferry system workforce issues, tax preference reform, a constitutional amendment to allow judges to deny bail where a person charged with certain serious offenses has a propensity toward violent behavior, and access to pain management prescription drugs.

Your thoughts and suggestions are always welcomed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Phil Rockefeller".

Sen. Phil Rockefeller

23<sup>rd</sup> Legislative District

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### **Ferry system collective bargaining and employee benefits under scrutiny**

Collective bargaining for Washington State Ferry (WSF) workers has long been unique to that system. [House Bill 3209](#) is aimed at making the collective bargaining and arbitration process for workers comparable to the process for other state employees. As amended by the Senate, HB 3209 would require arbitrators to consider the state's ability to pay collective bargaining awards, compare

benefits and wages to those of other state employees, and to consider whether wages are sufficient to maintain a stable workforce. Under current law, arbitrators do not consider those factors.

The Senate version of HB 3209 would also discontinue the WSF practice of allowing free ferry passage to current and former employees and their families, except that ferry workers may still ride for free when commuting directly to or from their assigned duty.

I voted against this amendment because it seems to me that this should be subject to negotiation and the underlying bill gives the Governor the power she needs to negotiate this issue. Nevertheless, I voted for the bill on final passage with this provision included since the bill, overall, is a step forward in improved management of WSF.

In addition, the Senate's transportation budget directs the Joint Transportation Committee to determine whether the state can save money — without penalizing workers — by processing ferry workers' work-related injury claims through the state Labor and Industries Department. This would end the time consuming — and costly — current process under which workers must sue the state when they have claims.

This bill awaits the Governor's signature.

### **Shining light on tax preferences**

For far too long, our state has relied on a regressive tax system designed a century ago for an economy markedly different from today's economy. We need continued discussion about a more informed and careful way to decide whether, when, and how to enact tax preferences.

Every dollar given out in tax exemptions to a favored few comes at the expense of services the state is asked to provide for all citizens. I believe we need to assess the merit of 500 plus tax exemptions, credits, waivers, deferrals, and preferential tax rates.

I introduced [SB 6853](#) to require more rigorous review of hundreds of tax preferences already embedded in the tax code, and bring more scrutiny to the proposed adoption or extension of preferences in the future. I believe the burden of proof needs to be placed on the entities who seek continued special treatment to prove their tax preference is still justified — many had or still have a purpose aimed at economic development or job creation and should be maintained. Other preferences may have once served this purpose but do no longer and need to be ended or scaled back.

### **Withholding bail from dangerous persons**

In a historic action to protect public safety, we approved an amendment to the state's Constitution that adds to situations in which a person charged with a violent crime can be held without bail. Bail is a constitutionally protected civil right. Any amendment to the Constitution must be assessed very carefully.

Under current law, judges may withhold bail only in cases involving capital offense. During the short session, both the House and Senate sought to protect public safety without discarding the constitutionally protected right to bail.

The revised version of [House Joint Resolution 4220](#) now states that “Bail may be denied for offenses punishable by the possibility of life in prison upon a showing by clear and convincing evidence of a propensity for violence that creates a substantial likelihood of danger to the community or any persons, subject to such limitations as shall be determined by the legislature.” I am pleased to have offered wording that proved to be the key to getting Senate agreement.

This now goes to the voters on the November ballot.

### **Pain medication education**

In the last decade, the use of opioid (pain medication) has increased 800%. More people die from opioids than car accidents every year. Specifically, Washington State has one of the highest mortality rates in the nation in overdoses from opiates with approximately 500 deaths a year, mostly between the ages of 35-55 — clearly there is a problem.

Opioid addiction often begins with the treatment of pain. Increasingly, people are given too much pain medication and therefore many end up abusing it.

There are assessment tools available to help track patients' progress, including:

- Tools to track pain and function
- Tools to screen for past and current substance abuse, and
- Guidance on use of urine drug tests.

Yet, many prescribers are not aware of these tools.

[HB 2876](#) addresses this by requiring certain health care boards and commissions to adopt rules regarding pain management and education on the best practices and provide tools and resources to improve the quality of care.

These guidelines will assist primary care providers when prescribing opioids in a safe and effective manner.

This bill has been sent to the governor for her signature.